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SEEING THROUGH THE SHADOWS: REFLECTING ON A PRACTICE IN PROGRESS

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Belinda Mason

My current body of work appears, on the surface, to be completely different to anything I have ever created, and yet, looking closely, retains all of the elements I have been exploring over time. Flowers and foliage are subjects to which I have always been attracted. Colour, light, contrast, drama – elements which are all there, and yet not. What is different is the way in which all of these things come together through the push and pull of oil on canvas.

The result is a series of paintings that hint at the subject without trying to be explicit or realistic. They draw inspiration from historical and contemporary sources, borrowing heavily from photography and coming to life through a process learned from researching my practice. An excerpt from Michael Greaves' text on my solo exhibition at Wave Project Space in January 2023 says it beautifully: "You need to take a moment to understand what it is that you are seeing, like the world coming into focus ... but it does not. The paintings are elusive, colour invades your senses, but is subtle."¹



Figure 1. Main wall hang at "First Light" exhibition, Wave Project Space, Dunedin, January 2023.

PROCESS TO PRACTICE

My work relates to bokeh photography due to the soft, out-of-focus and blurred nature of the painted surface. My process has become something of a ritual, a pathway to follow. It begins with a photograph from my phone, usually of flowers, but occasionally trees and shrubs or fruit. I have always taken these photos and have, in the past, painted them as caught on camera. The introduction to an easy-to-use phone app means I can manipulate my composition quickly, blurring lines, darkening, saturating the colours. The push and pull of painting begins before I've even picked up a brush. When it's right – an instinctive measurement – I print it out in colour and that's when the next step begins.

Gridding was something I was taught early in the first year of my BVA – suggested as a way to overcome my fear of getting my drawing onto the canvas and remove the apprehension that I would 'stuff it up,' a methodology which proved to be correct. It was soothing to create a grid in soft charcoal lines, transfer my drawing and then remove much of the charcoal with a brush. One step closer. The process continues with an acrylic underwash. Using a colour that will inform the dark tones to be applied later; a light wash of the chosen colour is used as a base, determining light and dark areas with successive passes of the brush.

For a moment, everything pauses as the base coat dries and I consider what colours I want to use to approximate my photo reference. I say 'approximate' because despite working from a photograph, I don't let it fully determine the final work. At some point it becomes more about me existing inside the painting, enjoying the material quality of paint, lost in the colours and the sound of the brushes, than it does about the original study; I do refer back to the photograph from time to time, but find that if I stick to it too closely, the painting doesn't work.

It's time to begin. Paint squeezes out. The palette knife mixes colours together, sometimes thinned a little with oil and solvent. A frenzy of brushing begins: working in the first layer of oils, pushing, stroking, smoothing and finding my way in the act of putting colour on the canvas. Both slowly and quickly the layers build. I stop, look, consider, then dive back in. It's hard to stop, to decide that I am finished. I like the adage, popularly attributed to Leonardo de Vinci, that "The painting is never finished. It is the artist who is finished with the painting."

This process has become a practice, changing and evolving as I go. It orders my thoughts and allows me a degree of control, which in turn means I can be looser in my approach. A painting that is 'finished' gives me joy, a feeling that it is right, complete, sensual, fabulous, fantastic. I keep going back to look, as if to reassure myself that the feeling is still there.

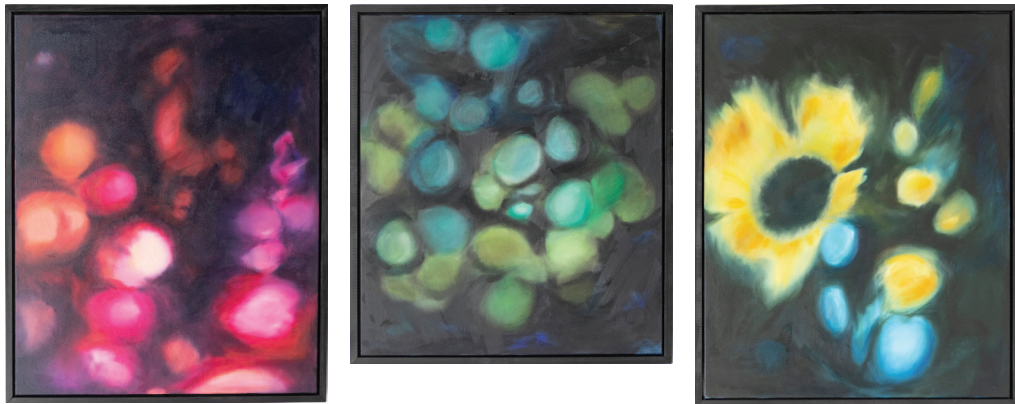


Figure 2. Final hang, SITE exhibition, Otago Polytechnic Dunedin School of Art, November 2022.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes, when you squint hard enough or you plunge into shadow after being in bright light, the world becomes blurry, loses its sharp edges and complicated lines. In its place is a collection of images radiating warmth and darkness. It is this feeling, this emotional response to these elements of the living environment, that my work embodies.

But a strong practice is not the only thing to have come out of three years of being immersed in a world that encourages and feeds creative souls. There is also knowledge, understanding, seeing, feeling and doing and, even though my formal study is over, it feels like I have only just begun.

Belinda Mason graduated with a BVA from Otago Polytechnic Dunedin School of Art in 2023, majoring in painting. She lives and works from her studio at home in Balclutha, South Otago. Belinda says: "My work is based in my love of plants and flowers and finding new ways to express this in colour and light. Strongly influenced by the Impressionists, my work also relates to bokeh photography due to its soft and blurred nature. After years of exploring pastel and watercolour, I am now working in oils on canvas, drawn to the creamy textures and the ability of oils to be moved around the surface. This has allowed me to lose the sharp edges and complicated lines of realism, and in its place leave an impression of the subject that glows in the shadows."

I Michael Greaves, "Belinda Mason: First Light" (exhibition text), Wave Project Space, Otepoti: Dunedin, January 2023.